

At Wellesley, the wide worlds of Lorraine O'Grady

The 89-year-old artist returns to her alma mater with a career survey as expansive as her mind-set.

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 15, 2024, 22 minutes ago



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two)," 1983. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts, 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.64 cm). Edition of 8 plus 1 artist's proof. © Lorraine O'Grady/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, and Mexico City).

WELLESLEY – Homecomings are rarely quite so literal as the one taking place at [Wellesley College's Davis Museum](#), where "Both/And," [Lorraine O'Grady's](#) heady 50-year career survey opened this month. O'Grady, a pivotal figure in the Black vanguard of New York's art scene in the 1980s, graduated from Wellesley in 1955; there's a better than decent chance she walked to and from class on the leafy pathways just outside the museum's door.

You'd be right to note a contrast. An elite all-girls college in 1950s New England might not seem like a typical incubator for the Black avant-garde, but everything about O'Grady elides binary assumption. "Both/And" isn't so much as a title as a way of being; O'Grady resists extremes, and her art lives in the comingling of complex opposites, a constant to-and-fro that makes her work more relevant than ever. In her humanely open-minded challenge to silo thinking, O'Grady, now 89, has always had something critical to say about the perils of retreating to one's corner; in a fractious election year, there's an eerie resonance.

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"Both/And" arrives [from the Brooklyn Museum](#), where it debuted near the pandemic's peak in early 2021. [I saw it there first](#) and was struck by both the work, which toggles breathlessly from joyful to outraged, fiery to poignant, and its awkward dispersal in distant corners of the museum. Brooklyn had its reasons for that, but the Davis presentation, organized by the museum's Amanda Gilvin, is crisp and linear, a clarifying strategy for an artist whose live performances are among her most powerful works.



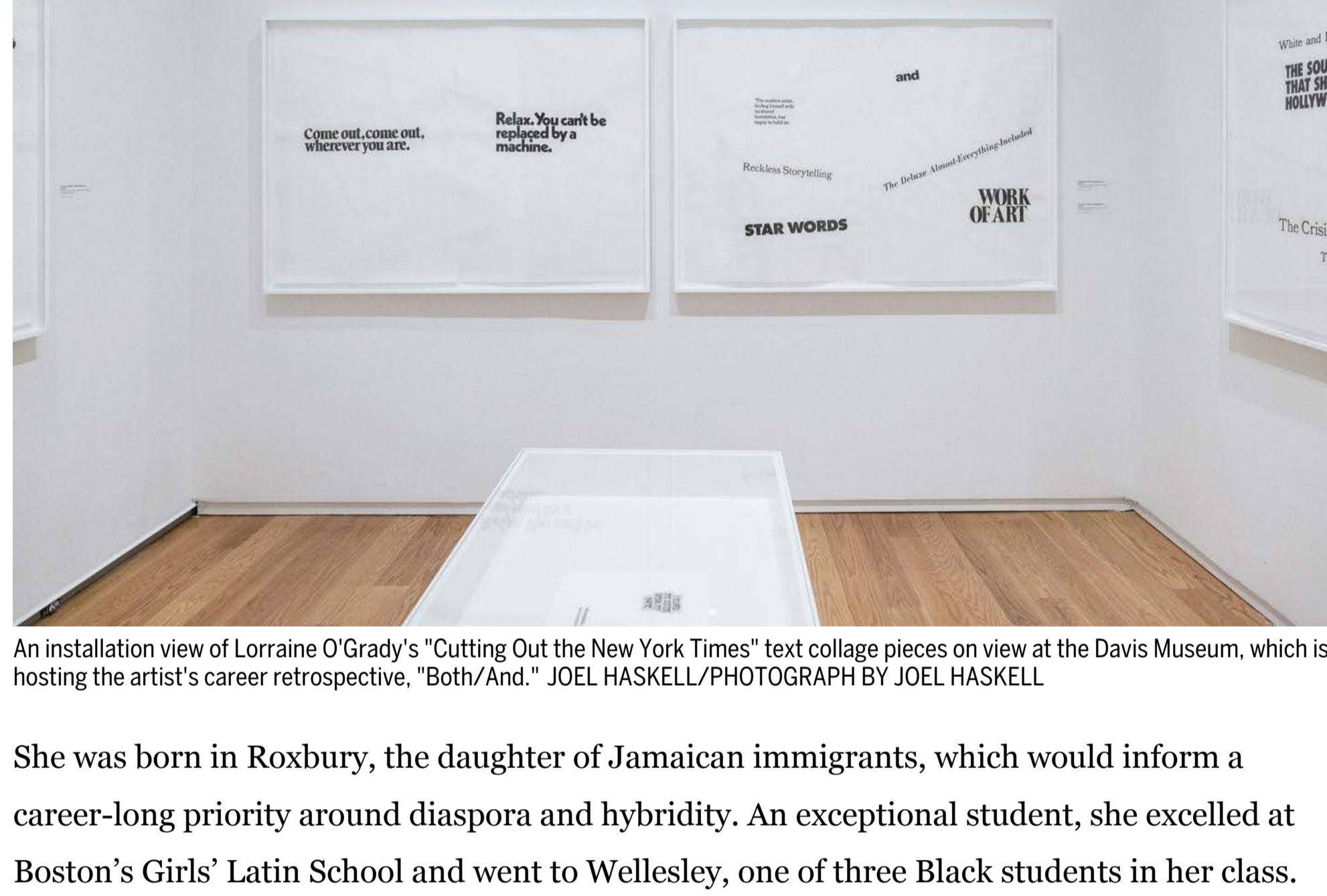
Lorraine O'Grady, "Rivers, First Draft: The Nantucket Memorial guides the Woman in Red to the other side of the stream," 1982/2015. © Lorraine O'Grady/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"[Rivers, First Draft](#)," a 1982 guerrilla performance O'Grady staged in Central Park, opens the exhibition; its 48 color documentation photos are tiled in clear narrative sequence along its white walls. No doubt you had to be there: O'Grady and crew arrived in the park one summer day and started performing; any audience was accidental, which was part of the point.

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But the pictures are a good stage-setter. A loose origin story of O'Grady's artistic coming-to-be — she plays the Lady in Red, her avatar — the piece is rich with reference to her New England roots: O'Grady, who grew up in Roxbury, cast an actor to play her mother, dressed in dreamy white, and others to play her as a child (the "Little Girl with the Pink Sash") and teen (the "Teenager in Magenta"). Her journey to becoming is marked by love, loss, and disdain from harpy-like figures called "the art snobs;" its final moment is a baptismal rite as the Lady in Red crosses barefoot through a stream accompanied by a figure in a nor'easter raincoat and hat, spray-painted pale gray — the "Nantucket Monument."

It sounds a little silly in plain text, I know; that's the problem with performance after the fact. But I was drawn in by O'Grady's seductively brash and ambitious invasion of public space. Through the theatricality, a vulnerable sincerity shines through. Her work embodies a lifelong quest to reconcile the multiple threads of her identity, and to hold them equally within her at once.

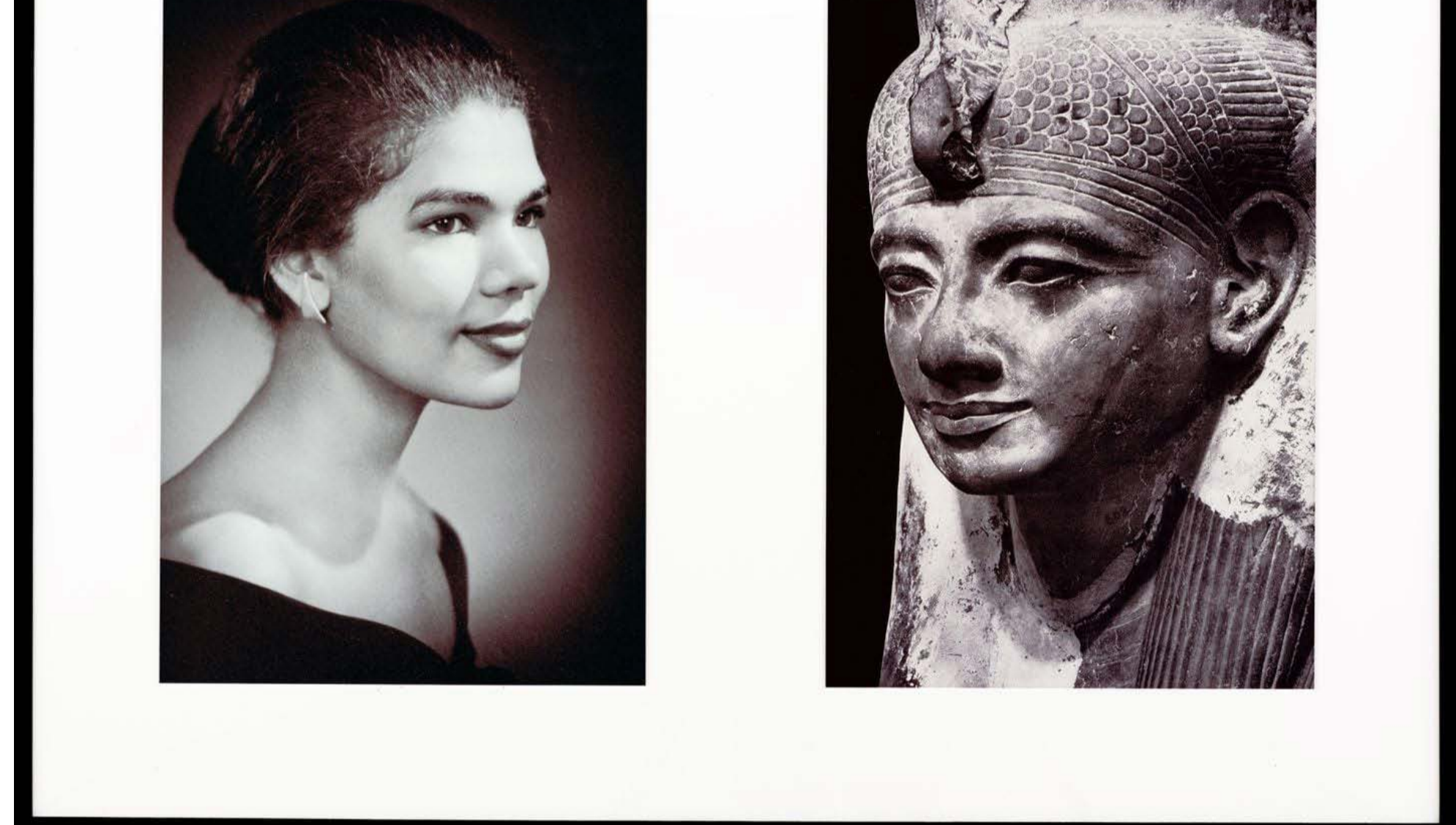


An installation view of Lorraine O'Grady's "Cutting Out the New York Times" text collage pieces on view at the Davis Museum, which is hosting the artist's career retrospective. "Both/And." JOEL HASKELL/PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL HASKELL

She was born in Roxbury, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants, which would inform a career-long priority around diaspora and hybridity. An exceptional student, she excelled at Boston's Girls' Latin School and went to Wellesley, one of three Black students in her class. With a degree in economics and world languages, she joined the US Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., in 1955. After a stint as an intelligence analyst for the State Department — she translated Spanish language newspapers for close screening during the Cuban Missile Crisis — she started a translation agency in Chicago before landing in New York in 1973. There, she taught art and literature at the School of Visual Arts and reviewed rock shows for Rolling Stone and the Village Voice. (When the Brooklyn show opened, she told The New York Times that she hadn't had "much univied life," one of my favorite quotes.)

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Teaching at the SVA, O'Grady had developed a speciality in Surrealism and Dada, bringing her closer to an art world that was growing increasingly fractured. The aftermath of the [civil rights movement](#) had helped to prompt the [Black arts movement](#), itself a response to the almost exclusively white art world establishment, which had all but sealed itself from the real world with zealously exclusionary barriers to entry. Then, in 1977, a cancer scare left her transformed. She started cutting headlines out of The New York Times and reassembling them in jagged collages, a topical echo of the Surrealist "exquisite cadaver," a mix-and-match communal writing exercise. For O'Grady, now in her 40s, it was the departure point. She had become an artist.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Sisters IV (left: Devonia's sister Lorraine; right: Nefertiti's sister Mutnedjmet)," from "Miscegenated Family Album, 1980/1994." © Lorraine O'Grady/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARIANE IBRAHIM

At the Davis, some of those pieces occupy one of the many galleries, mostly on their own; they're so apart from her deeply personal performance pieces — guerrilla interventions, imposed on the everyday — that for me define O'Grady's art, they feel strangely detached. But the provocatively playful element is consistent, a tie that binds. "Some people go/In Search of/The Trauma of/PRIVACY," reads one bashed-together series of snippets; it read like the heroine O'Grady-to-live credo of O'Grady's perpetually out-there self.

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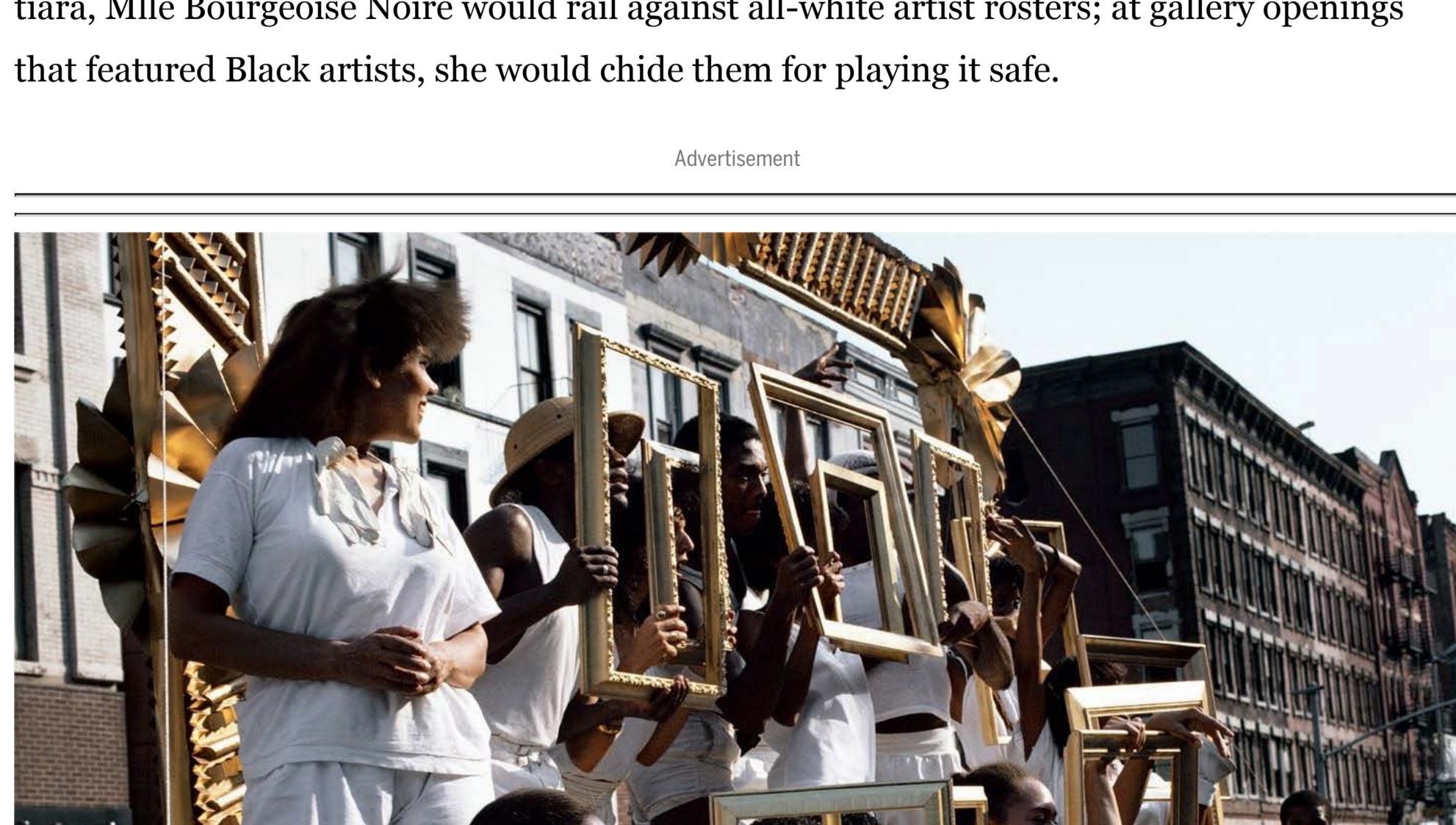
O'Grady works across plenty of media, including video and photography, all of which can be found here in abundance. Her "[Miscegenated Family Album, 1980/1994](#)," photos of family like her sister paired with images of Ancient Egyptian icons like Nefertiti, bluntly attach significance to O'Grady's family, hybrid Jamaican/Americans, where significance has been typically denied. They also call out racism even in antiquity; Ancient Egypt is revered as the root of Western culture, while neighboring Nubia, distinctly African, has been denigrated as primitive for years, a framing only recently debunked.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire asks, 'Won't you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?' (New Museum performance, 1981)," from "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, 1980-1983/2009." © Lorraine O'Grady/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARIANE IBRAHIM

Three years after my first encounter with the show, I found my fascination with O'Grady galvanized in her fearless forays into the public realm. "Rivers, First Draft," is the gentle version, a bout of public introspection. "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire," introduced in 1980, was O'Grady at her most charismatically fierce. Her entree to the art world a few years earlier made the schism clear: On the one hand, a dominant, white art world elite; and on the other, what she saw as a Black art scene smugly satisfied within the silo it had created. Fearlessly crashing museum openings dressed in a long gown of stitched-together white gloves and a tiara, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire would rail against all-white artist rosters; at gallery openings that featured Black artists, she would chide them for playing it safe.

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Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Troupe with Mlle Bourgeoise Noire)," 1983. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts. Edition of 8 plus 1 artist's proof. © Lorraine O'Grady/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, and Mexico City).

O'Grady's self-awareness has always been the core of her work: As an outsider who could see the absurdity of being in the plan, her work was inevitably larger, more complicated, and richer because of it. That awareness was also the engine of her most powerful and affecting work, "Art Is" As Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, O'Grady joined the African-American Day parade in Harlem on an unsanctioned float, waving to the crowd from within a gilded frame. A crew of white-clad performers scattered into the crowd lining the street, each holding a gold frame — an invitation for anyone to have their photo taken, and become art.

One large wall of the exhibition is devoted to it; the dozens of photographs capture a jubilant moment — every picture is a joy, each subject elated — and refute the idea of art as rarefied and the privilege of the few. It's as humane and generous a gesture as you're likely to see in the art world. It's also a credo of sorts for an artist whose work in public is as generous as it is complex — an invitation to sit with broad, uncomfortable questions in a frightfully narrowing world.

LORRAINE O'GRADY: BOTH/AND

At the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley. Through June 2. 781-283-2051, www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum.

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